

Early Businesses at the Mouth in White River Township

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C1869-74 – One of the first pictures of the Mouth, also called New White Haven, Stump, Ferrysville and White River Village.

White River Township was created in Ottawa County in 1848. At first it extended from Manistee to Grand Haven and a description said that it went “ever so far inland.” Over time the township became smaller (15.9 square miles today) due to sections being removed and added to other townships. The main business area of the township was known as the Mouth. In 1859 it became part of Muskegon County. Today White River Township is bordered on the North by Claybanks in Oceana County, on the East by Montague, on the South by White Lake and on the West by Lake Michigan. It is impossible to get an authentic municipal history of this township, owing to the township board solemnly burned up the books in 1859, because of some tangle in the funds.

In 1849 most of the land surrounding the Mouth of the old channel was owned by Ansel Hulbert and at that time there was only one family of European descent in the area by the last name of Lafferty. In November 1849, Ansel Hulbert sold about 40 acres to William M. Ferry. This is the land on which the Ferry mill was built in 1850. The mill was sold to Heald, Avery & Co. in 1864 and it continued to operate there until 1877.

According to the 1850 Census, Ansel Hulbert was born in Massachusetts in March 1782. His wife Catherine was born in Pennsylvania in 1792. Ansel died in December 1861 and is buried in the Mouth Cemetery.

The early hotels were nothing like they are today. In 1850 Peter Hobler, his wife Ruth, their baby daughter Eunice, and a girl for help, came from Milwaukee across the lake in a passenger schooner and

anchored at the mouth of White River. Here is Ruth Hobler's account of when she first came to the Mouth. "We came ashore in the vessel's yawl. On the shore, among six or eight shanties there was one somewhat larger than the rest dignified by the name "Hotel", and to this, we were directed. We were shown to a large room roughly boarded up containing six beds, the one we were to occupy having a small curtain in front of it. Upon examination, we found the mattress and pillows made of marsh hay, with bedbugs, fleas, and mosquitoes for company. About one o'clock ten men came tumbling in and took possession of the other five beds."

She continued, "In the morning on going down to breakfast, we found there were lumber rafters who had just come with their rafts from a water mill about five miles up the lake. The breakfast consisted of black coffee, with maple sugar of the Indians' make, and no milk, some fat salt pork and cold beans poorly cooked, some bread without butter, and black molasses. You will see that for a hotel this was a very poor excuse. The landlady claimed to be in poor health, induced I think, by her dislike for work, her help being a German woman just over who knew nothing of our way of cooking. In a few days, my husband and another man went out to select a place to build a shanty and succeeded in finding the body of an old log house."

The Mouth had its share of hotels with the first one being built by Ansel Hulbert. Alfred A. Caine and Charles Cushway would become business partners in a hotel in the early 1850s. Alfred was born in New York in 1822. He was appointed Postmaster in 1854 and was the Justice of the Peace according to the 1860 census. He married Roselia Burrows and they had several children. He died in Illinois in 1883.

Charles Peter Cushway was born in Saginaw in 1829. He came to Grand Haven and sailed on the Schooner "Honest John" and the sloop "Ranger" both belonging to Charles Mears. Cushway worked for the Ferrys at the Mouth for several years and for 9 years for Heald, Avery & Co. Charles Cushway married Esther Louisa Storms in 1855 and they had four sons and two daughters. His wife died in December 1880.

Two other hotels were established around 1855. The first one was operated by L.W. Lanford and the other by Lucy Storms.

Lorenzo Warren Lanford was born in New York about 1809. He was listed in the 1860 census as Hotelkeeper. His wife Emily was the Landlady. They had three children at the time. Their oldest, George, age 16 was listed as Bartender. There were 10 other individuals recorded as being at the hotel at the time the census was taken, including James Dalton, a Steamboat Captain, and Dr. John A. Wheeler. It is believed that L. W. Lanford died sometime in 1861.

Lucy A. Storms was the widow of Garison Storms who had died in February 1860. Lucy was listed in the census for that year as a Boarding House Keeper. The City Directory for 1863 listed her as Hotel Keeper. Garison Storms was born in New York in 1810. He and Lucy A. Nash married in the early 1830s. He found his way to Oceana County where he was listed in the 1850 census with his wife Lucy and their four children: Sarah (1834-), Esther Louise (1837-1880), Benjamin D. (1840-1867) & Garrison P. (1842-1920). Lucy died in March 1890.

William Frank Bruce was born in Ohio on 5 July 1842. In 1843 his parents moved to Milwaukee. At the age of fourteen he shipped on board the schooner America. The ship was stranded a short distance below Pigeon Hill in Muskegon where it remained until Spring before being taken off. The crew,

however, was rescued. Mr. Bruce made his way to the Whitehall area where he went to work in a sawmill, but the company went into bankruptcy. His "settlement" consisted of one pound of tobacco on a basis of \$7 per month, the salary for which he was labored. Not discouraged, he secured employment at Claybanks for about three years before coming to the Mouth. Bruce married Mary Ann Hill in 1858. They would have 4 children before she died in November 1874.

In July 1869 William Bruce had bought some land where he built his mercantile store. He paid \$350 for the land. About this time he was appointed Postmaster, a position he held for about five years.

In September 1874, when his wife Mary became ill, William sold the land where his store was located for \$1,000 and engaged in buying and selling farm stock. He sold the property to William Keyson. Bruce's wife died later that year in November and sometime between his wife dying and 1877, he got back ownership of the building that had been his store. Sometime after his wife died, Bruce married Lena Mok and they had a daughter. By 1880 William Bruce was running a hotel out of the building that was his mercantile store, which was called the White River Hotel. In February 1888 Bruce sold the property for the last time to Warren A. Austin & Henry Warnick. They intended to fix it up and run it as a resort.

A couple of the hotel owners would leave the Mouth and move to Whitehall and open hotels there. In 1862 Peter Hobler built the first hotel in Whitehall, the Union Hotel, which later burned down in 1870. Alfred Caine built a hotel in Whitehall called the Cosmopolitan, which met the same fate as the Union Hotel and burned in 1881.

Hotels at the Mouth would become the focal point of the little community in times of celebration. In 1846, Mr. Hulbert's hotel would play a part in the July 4th celebration with the serving of a salt pork dinner. Years later in 1863, Caine's hotel would be the scene for the community to celebrate July 4th. The day started with a boat ride and picnic at "The Head" on a scow called the Monitor, on land that is part of Whitehall. Arriving at "The Head" the party proceeded to a spot beyond the grist mill on the North Hill. Edward Ferry gave the oration. Dinner was next. There were enough tables arranged in a circle to accommodate all the guests and the baskets were opened. The dinner consisted of chicken pie, fried chicken, chicken baked, "riz" biscuit, and green currant pie. In the evening most of the party went on to White River to the ball at Caine's hotel. Sadly, the day of the July 4th celebration, unknown to the Mouth community at the time, resident Noah Ferry lost his life at the battle of Gettysburg.

The main economic driver for the Mouth community would be the sawmill that would stand between the road that came down the south hill (later named the Old Channel Trail) and the bayou. In November of 1849, Ansel Hulbert sold about 40 acres at the Mouth to William M. Ferry of Grand Haven. In 1850, William M. Ferry would create a mill yard and built a steam sawmill and store. Scott and Stebbins ran the mill for a few years. In 1854, Noah H. Ferry arrived in the fall to run the mill at the Mouth and would until he left for the war in 1862.

Heald, Avery & Co. bought the mill in 1864, and in 1875 they made extensive changes and improvements to the mill and its operations. The steam sawmill ran through the 1877 season with D. Leitch being the last superintendent at the Heald & Avery Mill at White River Village. The mill would have one last hurrah with William Bruce and Garrison P. Storms installing shingle machinery in the old mill. They would run the mill for a short time in 1886 to produce shingles.

Two services that were important to the lumbering industry were the lighters and the bayou oxen teams. There were three parts to the old channel system to get to White Lake. White Lake itself, then the bayou that ran on the east side of the dunes and the actual channel with the walls on either side to go from the bayou out to Lake Michigan. Larger schooners that were too big to pass through the bayou that was between White Lake and the old Channel had to stay in the deeper water of Lake Michigan. A lighter was a flat-bottomed boat used for carrying finished lumber through the channel, pulled by a rope, out to the waiting schooners to load their lumber freight.

In the early 1850s, Charles Mears maintained a building and several lighters used for loading his vessels at the Mouth. Barton Haggerty and his wife Mary ran this building as a lodging house for a time, having charge of Charles Mears' interest at that point. They provided meals and lodging to travelers and the hands that were employed there. They ferried travelers and their horses and rented the lighters for loading vessels. Barton Haggerty received the sum of \$83.07 for 145 days of work. Haggerty enlisted in Company A, 2nd Illinois Cavalry in 1861 and served until 1864. They lived in the Claybanks area where Mary died in September 1880.

The bayou oxen teams were teams of men and oxen whose job it was to move logs, finished products, and even smaller sailing vessels through the bayou. They would follow a path that ran along the bayou and either pulled by ropes or used long poles to move the log rafts. These teams would move logs tied together as large rafts that came down the White River to move to either the Ferry Mill at the Mouth or to one of several other mills on White Lake. The oxen teams were pretty much the only way to get through the bayou part of the old channel.

The Mouth also had a retail shop, besides the Ferry store, and area liquor sellers. William Bruce had a mercantile store at the Mouth in the early 1870s. In 1881, Chris Weber and William F. Bruce were the only individuals to have licenses to sell liquor in the area and William would be the only saloon keeper in White River two years later. William Bruce died in October 1896.

The Mouth did not become a village until later in 1850 when the mill was built. This little community had several industries including hotels, lumber and fishing. There was a colony of fishermen at the Mouth. Some of them were James Sullivan, J. Whelan, John Foley, and Edward Powers.

The first post office in White River was established in 1854 with A. A. Caine as the first postmaster. S.J.B. Watson, who was born in 1814 in Hartford, Connecticut, came to White River as a carpenter for the Ferry's in 1855. He was postmaster from 1858 to 1860, receiving about \$300 annually. Horace L. Jones was PM in October 1862 followed by John Welch in May 1864 and William A. Roe in May 1876.

Sylvester J.B. Watson was married twice. His first wife was Sylvia Haight and they had a son Theodore B. Watson in 1844, who became proprietor of the Mears Hotel. Sylvester's second wife was Mary Hewitt who he married in New York in December 1849. They had two children: a daughter Ellen in 1850 who died in 1871, and a son Sanford in 1852. Sylvester held various positions of trust in the community being elected supervisor nine consecutive years. He died in Montague in 1885. His wife Mary died in 1916 and they are both buried in Oak Grove Cemetery.

The major things like the sawmill and the channel kept the Mouth a thriving community. The channel opened for shipping in 1870. They were still working on the piers in 1872. After the completion of the

government channel to the south, the old channel and the mouth drifted shut, and all the traffic moved toward Montague and Whitehall. The combination of new channel and the closing of the sawmills years later, ended up causing the area hotels to close and ended the Mouth's time as a business center.